

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING DIFFICULTIES IN CHILDREN

How Difficulties with Memory, Planning and
Organisation Affect Your Child's Behaviour

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*‘Yesterday is but today’s memory and
tomorrow is today’s dream’*

- Khalil Gibran

Acknowledgment:

This resource is part of a series of resources for foster parents who are raising children living with developmental difference caused by early life adversity. The guides are intended to provide general educational information only, and are not a substitute for professional assessment and intervention.

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What Is Executive Functioning and How Does It Affect Children?

All social behaviour and learning is underpinned by the brain's executive functioning skills. Executive functioning skills are closely associated with many of the other functions of the brain, such as the ability to pay attention. Executive functioning skills allow us to direct our attention to any given task or activity and to take steps towards achieving everyday goals. This is why executive functioning skills are so important for everyday life.

Without the 'control centre' of the brain working efficiently, our thinking, our approach to learning, and our behaviour can be disorganized, erratic or seem inappropriate to context.

Poor executive control means that your child will become frustrated with tasks that need planning, organisation and flexibility; or tasks that rely on memory. Instead they adopt a very concrete approach to learning and show poor emotional and behavioural control. The brain's executive functioning skills are at the heart of our ability to plan future activities; and:

***TO CONTROL, ORGANISE &
DIRECT OUR THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS & BEHAVIOUR***

We draw heavily on our executive functioning skills in most of our everyday interactions. The ability to make good choices and decisions; to follow rules in social, school or work settings; to apply our existing knowledge to new situations; and to distinguish relevant information from distractions are all underpinned by our executive functioning skills.

***Executive functioning skills are central to our ability
to achieve in academic, work,
and social settings.***



So What Do We Mean by Executive Functioning?

The executive functioning skills are like the ‘air traffic controller’ or ‘orchestra conductor’ of the brain. When working well together, the executive functioning skills ensure the brain’s smooth and coordinated functioning. The executive functioning skills are a collection of coordinated skills that include short term (working) memory; inhibition of impulsive responses; planning of behaviour; organisation skills; and self-monitoring.

Executive skills are central to flexible thinking, organisation memory and self-regulation.

When your child’s executive functioning is intact and working smoothly, your child is able to learn new information and respond flexibly to changing circumstances and novel situations without much difficulty. Your child will be reasonably adaptable; will be able to cope with unstructured situations easily; and can apply what they have learned from one setting to another. When one or more of your child’s executive skills is poorly developed, however, your child can experience difficulty with initiating tasks (getting started on something); with new learning, with responding to feedback; with predicting the consequences of their actions; and with flexible thinking.

Scientists are still developing their understanding of how the executive functioning skills interact with each other to affect behaviour. While we don’t yet know exactly how the executive skills develop, we do know that these skills are impaired in many children with behaviour problems.

Executive functioning develops as the child grows. While it is poorly developed in preschool children, it usually develops markedly around the time that most children start school.

Poor executive skills affect children’s social and educational functioning. Difficulties with one or more executive skills are commonly found in children with persistent behaviour problems. For this reason, it is useful to be aware of some of the signs of poor executive functioning. These signs are included in this resource. If you think your child may have difficulty with executive functioning, you may also like to try some of the strategies that are included in this resource too.

How Do I Know If My Child Has Difficulty with Executive Functioning Skills?

Executive functioning difficulties are associated with several ‘disorders’ of childhood. Children with any of the following diagnoses are likely to experienced difficulty in one or more of the executive functioning skills: Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); Conduct Disorder (CD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Bipolar Disorder and many of the anxiety or mood disorders.



For example, children with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can have difficulty with forward planning, goal setting and self-regulation; and can be narrow and inflexible and in their thinking. Children with a diagnosis of ADHD can have difficulty with inhibiting responses, with sustaining attention and with self-regulation. Children with FASD may have difficulty with working memory, with shifting attention from task to task, and with transitioning from one activity to another.

If your child has one of these diagnoses and has difficulty with executive functioning you may notice it most during times of change or other kinds of transition. Change and transitions are more difficult because they rely more heavily on executive functioning skills. It is very common for children with executive control difficulty to cope well in highly structured and predictable settings, but have difficulty in unpredictable or changing environments.

The Development of Executive Functioning in Foster Children

Executive functioning difficulties have been found amongst children with a whole range of childhood difficulties; especially childhood disorders that are associated with behavioural or learning problems. Many children who experience difficulty with executive control have not experienced abuse or neglect. These difficulties do not only occur amongst children in foster care.

We do know, however, that children who have experienced early adversity, early brain damage, prenatal exposure to alcohol, or severe maltreatment during childhood are particularly prone to these types of executive difficulties. Therefore many children in foster care need support in this area.

Researchers think that perhaps some of these difficulties arise because of the poor early caregiving experience of many foster children -which prevents the brains executive control system from developing in the optimal way.

Recent research on the neurobiological functioning of children who have experienced maltreatment supports the idea that these children can have impaired executive control compared with children of the same age who haven't experienced abuse. While we don't know for sure, we believe that the brains of maltreated children develop differently than other children. We believe that the brain areas involved in detecting danger and responding to threat (the 'fight or flight' response) may become more developed than areas the areas of the brain that are involved in developing executive



functioning. This may explain why these children have more difficulty in controlling behaviour, and in organising their thoughts and paying attention. Research has also shown that prenatal alcohol and substance exposure damages children's executive control abilities as well.

There can be quite a marked difference between your child's actual age and their executive functioning 'age'. Executive functioning develops over time as a child grows; we do know that all children's executive functioning skills naturally improve as they grow older. This is why an eight year old child is better able to concentrate than a four year old; or why an eleven year old has better emotional regulation than a three year old. However, because a maltreated child is likely to have poor executive functioning, they are often functioning at a younger developmental age. Therefore it is more realistic to align your expectations with your child's developmental age; rather than their actual age. Children with compromised executive functioning are also likely to have poor social skills that are related to poor executive skills such as impulse control, flexible thinking, and being able to take another's perspective. There is a strong relationship between the functioning of a child's 'executive' control centre and the development of their social skills.

Children who are not flexible thinkers; have difficulty in responding to changing rules; or taking another's perspective will find the fast pace of the school playground difficult to cope with.

There is also a strong relationship between executive functioning skills and children's school performance. In a school environment, poor executive functioning skills will affect your child's ability to attend to the teacher; screen out irrelevant information or distractions; and monitor their own performance. Difficulties with memory and planning may mean your child can't easily remember long instructions; leading teachers to view them as inattentive, wilfully disobedient, or even lazy. For these reasons, developing children's executive functioning can help with both their social and school performance.

How Do I Know If My Child's Executive Functioning Is Compromised?

Irrespective of your child's 'diagnosis', your child can benefit from strategies to strengthen their executive control if they have any of the following symptoms:



- Your child has trouble **getting started on a task** (initiating an activity). A child with this difficulty can't seem to organise their thoughts enough to know how to get started on a task. This difficulty can often be interpreted as laziness, or as procrastination. Children with this difficulty can become so overwhelmed that they end up doing nothing; they never start anything because they can't work out where to begin!
- Your child has trouble with **planning, organising and monitoring** their performance during an activity. In this case, your child struggles to break a task into smaller steps and smaller goals. A child with this difficulty can struggle to keep track of belongings and may be constantly losing things. Once started on a task, they may lose track easily, easily go off topic or get distracted.
- Your child has difficulty with **cognitive flexibility** (flexible thinking). The child with poor cognitive flexibility remains stuck on one way of doing things. This child is often unable to respond to feedback that what they are doing isn't working in order to change the way they approach a task accordingly. Children with this difficulty don't seem to be able to benefit from feedback. They can't easily come up with alternative solutions and find it difficult to change strategy once they start on a task. These children may need support to monitor their progress on tasks. They can also find transitioning from task to task difficult; and will need additional support such as time warnings, visual prompts, and tasks lists to support them to leave one activity and start a new one.
- Your child has trouble with **emotional and behavioural control**. This child will have difficulty in controlling emotional or behavioural outbursts; they can be emotionally over-reactive. Emotional outbursts often occur in response to seemingly minor triggers. Children with poor emotional control can also be impulsive. They can have great difficulty in checking their actions; often rushing through tasks quickly or being impulsive in their responses. On the other extreme, children with emotional control problems can also have difficulty in recognising and expressing emotions appropriately; these children are emotionally under-reactive. While some children are emotionally explosive; others do not express any feelings at all; even when these feelings are appropriate to the circumstances. Both emotional over-reactivity and emotional under-reactivity are important forms of difficulty with emotional control.
- Your child has difficulty with **working memory**. In this case, the child will appear forgetful and as though they are not paying attention. They may struggle to remember instructions, especially multi-step instructions; and have difficulty in holding instructions in mind while completing a task. This difficulty is commonly interpreted as deliberate non-compliance; when in fact the child is not able to retain your instructions in their memory for long enough to act on them.



What might help the child who experiences difficulty with executive functioning?

Executive functioning is really a cluster of related skills. A child can have difficulty with **one or many** of these inter-related skills; and experience varying degrees of difficulty from minor to extreme. While we don't have specific tests that tell us which difficulties children may be experiencing; we do know that children do better when their parents adapt their parenting to include a few simple principles.

We believe that principles like **simplifying the environment** as much as possible, **breaking complex tasks down into simpler activities** and including **monitoring** strategies can all be helpful. Applying these principles provides your child the 'scaffolding' that is needed for your child to build more effective executive functioning skills. We believe that applying the ideas covered here -and summarised in the tables in this resource will benefit most, if not all, children with executive functioning difficulties.

We believe that principles like simplifying the environment, breaking tasks down into simpler activities, and including monitoring strategies are all helpful to the child with executive functioning compromise.

Recognising and Responding to Difficulties in Planning, Organising, and Self-Monitoring Skills

The first area of difficulty that your child can have is difficulty with planning, organising and keeping themselves on track (self-monitoring). Children who experience difficulty with planning, organising and self-monitoring can find it hard to plan activities, prioritise the most important tasks to complete first, get started on tasks, and organise themselves sufficiently to see activities through to completion. These kinds of difficulties tend to be most noticeable in a school setting. Children with this kind of difficulty in getting schoolwork completed give up on schoolwork, finding it too overwhelming, or 'act out'. Children who have difficulty in planning and organising school work find school increasingly difficult as they get older and are expected to be more self-directed in their learning. These kinds of difficulty also frequently translate into problems in setting a goal and working steadily towards a future event or activity (e.g., savings money, or practising music skills for a performance). These children can seem as though they lack ambition; they can be perceived as lazy or easily distracted.



Children with planning and organisation problems can seem as though lack ambition; they may be perceived as lazy or easily distracted.

The demand on a child's executive functioning skills increases with the degree of planning and organisation needed to complete a task. The strategies recommended in this resource are designed to reduce the demand on a child's executive functioning, and therefore make it easier for the child to complete tasks without frustration. If difficulties in organisation and planning seem to be a problem for your child, try the following strategies:

Try to provide a **simplified, structured, and uncluttered** environment; with **clear routines**; and where expectations are **spelled out explicitly** for the child. It can be helpful to have key routines demonstrated as visual sequences, using cartoons or photos to show your child the steps in daily routines.

Key daily routines that should be supported this way include:

- Bedtime routines (bath, brush teeth, put on pyjamas, read a story with mum, lights out)
- Routines for getting ready for school (eat breakfast, brush teeth, put on uniform, pack schoolbag)
- Routines for coming in from school (empty school bag, put uniform in wash, have snack, play time, start homework).

Key environment changes that can support your child include:

- Colour coding (using specific coloured bins for toys and for shoes, dirty washing etc.). Use visual reminders and prompts.
- Having clearly defined places for specific things (e.g. Where to put school bag, a place for recharging phone and laptop, specific sleeves or coloured folders for each school subject).

Key strategies to help children to develop self-monitoring skills include:

- Break big tasks down into smaller jobs and make your expectations clear; monitor children's progress, providing prompts for next steps if needed, and positive feedback for staying on task.
- Talking out loud can role model how organised thinking works, and help children to internalise positive self-talk that helps to keep them on track (e.g. Talk out loud when doing tasks 'What do I do next?', 'What do I do when I'm finished?', 'What am I'm supposed to next?')



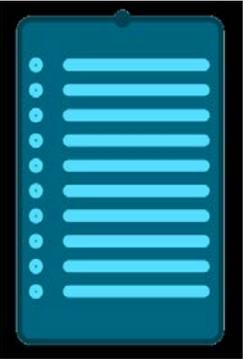
What Does Difficulty in Planning, Organising and Self-Monitoring Look Like?

Take a moment to think about the needs of your child compared to other children the same age. Does the list below describe your child? If so, your child might benefit from strategies to support their skills in planning, organising or self-monitoring.

- ✓ Doesn't know where or how to start a task or is slow to get started?
- ✓ Is not able to organise tasks or set goals on their own?
- ✓ Has difficulty with multi-step tasks; seems to lose place or lose focus?
- ✓ Is not able to plan ahead or predict consequences of actions?
- ✓ Is not able to prioritise; is easily distracted by irrelevant activities?
- ✓ Is not able to keep track of belongings; keep school bag and room tidy?
- ✓ Is not able to follow age-appropriate routines independently?
- ✓ Never allows enough time to complete school assignments?
- ✓ Needs supervision to stay on task and complete activities?



HOW TO HELP BUILD PLANNING AND ORGANISATION SKILLS

STRATEGY	WHAT MIGHT THAT LOOK LIKE?
<p>Provide as much Routine and Predictability as possible</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make the environment as predictable as possible so expectations are clear• Involve your child in organising their bedroom so that they know where everything goes.• Use the same approach to children’s belongings (e.g., school bag)• Establish clear routines for important daily transitions (e.g., a ‘get in from school’ and ‘going to bed’ routine)• Colour-code items; have distinct areas for different activities and use visual reminders to help create an ordered environment
<p>Use Lists</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help your child to learn how to use lists effectively• Lists can be used for daily-tasks or they can be used to help the child manage larger projects such as schoolwork• Each task on a list should be well-defined and sequential so the child is clear about what they need to achieve next• For larger projects like school work it is helpful to set times for each task so the child can’t get distracted or take too much time on any one step.• Older children may prefer to use phone apps to do the same thing (e.g., ‘Astrid’)
<p>Use Organisation Tools</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Older children might like to use organisational tools such as Google Calendar• These types of software can give reminders, plan for walking time to a destination, and even notes e.g. bring sheet music to lesson• Items in these organisational apps can be categorised and colour coded• Alarms and reminders can be set (e.g., time to start homework)



Use Mind-Mapping and other Memory Strategies



- Children can have difficulty in seeing the big picture and this can hinder them in planning projects
- Decision trees and mind mapping techniques can help children to plan projects and organise their thoughts
- Mind-mapping can be used together with colour-coding, and memory techniques to help with learning about specific topics or in planning activities

Teach Self-Monitoring Skills



- Teach children to ask themselves questions (e.g., what do I need to do next? How long should I spend on this job?). You may need to model self-questioning by talking aloud until the child has learned to do this for themselves
- Timers and phones can be used as reminders for staying on task (start with shorter intervals and gradually increase the time on task)
- You can monitor your child's behaviour to start with; providing regular reinforcement for staying on task, and gradually allowing them to take more responsibility for monitoring their own behaviour



Recognising and Responding to Difficulties in Working Memory

Working memory refers to the ability to temporarily hold and manipulate information within your memory while at the same time doing a task that relies on this information. Working memory underpins many of the tasks we do in day to day life. One example that we are all familiar with is trying to memorise a new phone number; we rely on our working memory when we are asked to memorise a phone number. In this case, we usually rehearse the number in our minds in order to keep from forgetting it.

If it is a longer number we may break it into smaller number 'chunks'; a strategy that allows us to cram more numbers into our working memory system. We are also likely to rehearse the memory- by saying it over to ourselves until we are able to write it down on paper. We automatically use similar strategies for everything we see or hear.

In children with executive functioning difficulties, poor working memory will often mean that children are unable to follow instructions; especially lengthy strings of information or multi-step instructions. Because children often struggle to remember what they are told, they are perceived as inattentive or disobedient. Poor working memory also affects a child's social relationships. This is because our competence in social settings relies on us being able to hold conversation and thoughts in mind at the same time. Without this ability, which relies on working memory, it is difficult for a child to keep up with conversation.

What Does Difficulty in Working Memory Look Like?

Take a moment to think about the needs of your child compared to other children the same age. Does the list below describe your child? If so, your child might benefit from strategies to support their working memory.

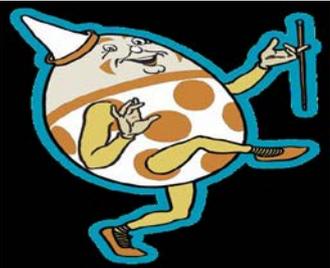
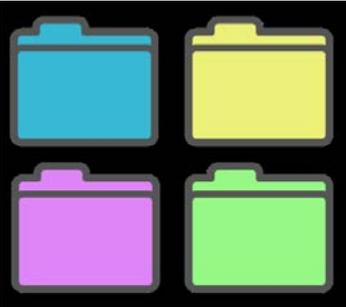
- ✓ Has difficulty in taking responsibility (e.g., remembering to feed the dog)
- ✓ Has trouble repeating back instructions to you
- ✓ Has trouble remembering lengthy instructions
- ✓ Can't remember information long enough to use it to finish a task.
- ✓ Can't retain the steps in a procedure once they have been read or heard
- ✓ Has trouble in remembering what she is meant to be doing at any given time



There are some strategies you can try if you believe your child has poor working memory. We believe that children can be more successful when we change a few things to make it easier for them. Try simplifying the environment by changing the way you interact with your child (use shorter sentences, use visual prompts). Try training their memory using games and commercial memory training computer games. Teach your child a strategy to signal that they can't remember. Some of these strategies are summarised in the table that follow.

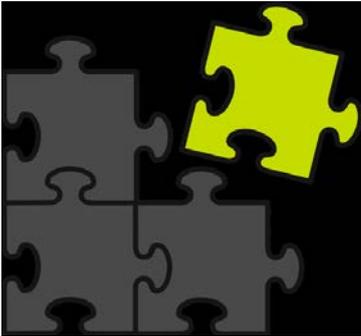


STRATEGIES TO HELP WORKING MEMORY

STRATEGY	WHAT MIGHT THAT LOOK LIKE?
<p data-bbox="86 436 288 465">Use Reminders</p> 	<ul data-bbox="667 436 1476 696" style="list-style-type: none">• Reminders can be given to your child both verbally and in written form.• Use visual strategies such as Post it notes on doors or fridges.• Use auditory reminders such alarm applications on mobile phones.
<p data-bbox="86 873 483 992">Use Acronyms and Rhymes to Help Remember Facts and Routines</p> 	<ul data-bbox="667 873 1492 1220" style="list-style-type: none">• Acronyms and Rhymes can be useful for both learning at school and for teaching children about social rules and/or routine.• Familiar examples include BODMAS (Brackets, operations, division, multiplication, addition, subtraction) to learn algebra rules and the ABC song to learn alphabet- but you can make up your own rhymes and acronyms for important rules and routines.
<p data-bbox="86 1377 448 1451">Put Information To Be Memorised Into Categories</p> 	<ul data-bbox="667 1377 1476 1547" style="list-style-type: none">• Organising important information into categories makes it easier to remember; and easier to recall.• Teach children to use visualisation skills to remember and link lists of objects according to category.

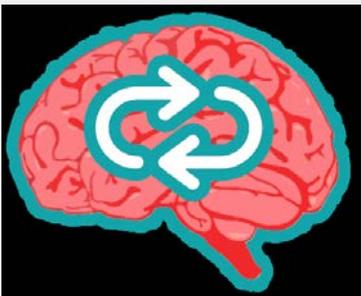


Chunking Information



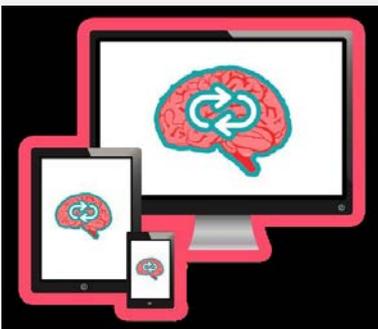
- Chunking means grouping things together in small 'Chunks'.
- Chunking improves our memory capacity because our short term memory sees each 'chunk' as one item. This means that we need to keep less in our working memory.
- A good example of this is memorizing a phone number by breaking it into smaller chunks of 3 numbers each- this way we only need to remember three or four chunks of information, instead of a string of nine or ten numbers.
- Another way to use 'chunking' is to break your instructions into smaller sentences e.g., instead of "go to your bedroom and tidy up and make sure you remember to bring down your dirty washing after you have changed" – you could chunk the request "go to your room (1st chunk). Get changed (2nd chunk). Then pick up your washing (3rd chunk). Bring your washing down (4th chunk)

Memory Consolidation



- Teaching your child to repeat information to themselves ('rehearsal') can help them to remember instructions. An example of this is when you want to remember a shopping list on the way to the shop, or a phone number someone has given you; you rehearse the information by repeating it to yourself several times. This is an example of how memory gets moved from short term to long term memory (memory consolidation).

Computer Assisted Training



- Computer assisted memory training programs have shown promising results in improving working memory in children with a range of attention and memory problems.
- CogMed and the Amsterdam Memory and Attention Training program for Children are examples of programs that can be purchased and that target children's memory and attention skills.



Recognising and Responding to Difficulties in Flexible Thinking

One of the main executive functioning difficulties that can be linked to behaviour problems is lack of flexible thinking (cognitive flexibility). Flexible thinking refers to the ability to alternate between different thoughts and actions; to shift easily from task to task; to come up with alternative responses to problems when frustrated; and to anticipate and respond adaptively to new situations or changing circumstances and surroundings. Being cognitively flexible means you are adaptable and able to respond quickly to a changing environment.

Because children with this difficulty take more time to change and adapt their behaviour to a changing environment, it is critical to pre-warn children about any impending change. You can talk to your child about how best to do this; many people use a timer, a cue such as a bell, or a paper linked chain to warn of impending change in activity (e.g., removing links in the paper chain one at a time as the time for transition draws near). Others find a transition object helpful; others give the child an object that tells them about where they need to go and what they need to do next (e.g., bring this note to the next lesson's teacher).

Children who lack flexible thinking skills will find it difficult to follow changing rules and expectations. These children dislike change and thrive on routine and predictability. They can get extremely anxious in anticipation of change; or new and unpredictable activities; which they tend to avoid at all costs. You can help children who are anxious about new activities by making as many links as possible between the activity you want to introduce and activities that the child is already familiar with. For example, you can say- 'Jonny's house is just like our house because they have a dog and a cat and a swimming pool. But Jonny's house is different because at Jonny's house they have a rule that they have to take off their shoes before coming inside'.

What Does Difficulty in Flexible Thinking Look Like?

Take a moment to think about the needs of your child compared to other children the same age. Does the list below describe your child? If so, your child might benefit from strategies to support their skills in thinking flexibly.

- ✓ Has trouble adapting to changes in routines and rituals.
- ✓ Has trouble analysing a situation from another person's perspective.
- ✓ Has difficulty in transitioning from one activity, task or setting to another.
- ✓ Has difficulty transitioning smoothly into rituals (e.g., bedtime routine).
- ✓ Has trouble changing strategy when something isn't working.



- ✓ Finds new or unfamiliar activities, places and people challenging.
- ✓ Struggles in unstructured settings such as playgrounds or in free play

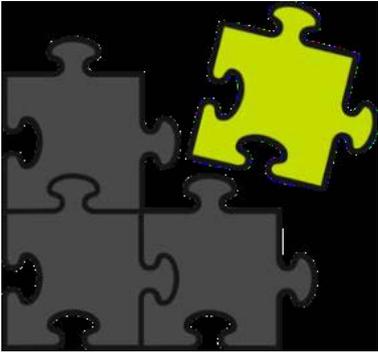
If difficulty in flexible thinking seems to be a problem for your child, there are some strategies you can try. It will be important to make your child's environment as *familiar and predictable* as possible. Tasks should be familiar; and any new tasks will need to be explained; one step at a time. New activities and events should be introduced by **emphasising what is familiar** (this is the same as ...) before pointing out what is new or different.

All types of transitions and new activities are likely to be difficult for these children and ample time should be set aside for warning, supporting and explaining transitions and changes. You should provide your child with lots of cueing and reminding about imminent change. Try to involve children in planning new activities as much as possible. Anxiety about new activities, people and places can be reduced by 'habituating' your child to the event. This means introducing them slowly to possible new activities, people or places.

For example, show your child pictures related to the upcoming event (the people who will be there, what the place looks like) before they go, so your child knows what to expect. Introduce new people and places gradually; and 'anchor' new situations in the familiar by highlighting what will be familiar to the child, rather than what is different (for example; "This classroom will look like you old classroom; there is a reading corner and you will sit in the front row like you did before. Here's a picture of the teacher, and this is where she sits." Some strategies to support flexible thinking are summarised in the table that follows.



STRATEGIES TO HELP WITH FLEXIBLE THINKING

STRATEGY	WHAT MIGHT THAT LOOK LIKE?
<p>Reduce Novelty as much as possible</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the child get familiar with new environments. This can include rehearsing social skills like greeting new people, advanced warning of transitions & gradual exposure to new situations. • Highlight what is familiar in any new or unfamiliar situations or people (e.g., he is like you because he likes play station too). • Provide as much information as possible prior to new situation (e.g., pictures of new teacher or classroom). • Always provide warnings and cues to impending change, or transitions to new activities. • Ask the school to warn of substitute teachers ahead of time so your child feels prepared.
<p>Simplify Tasks and make them more familiar</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to simplify the complexity and new learning involved in new situations by decreasing the speed, volume, or complexity of the information you present. Break tasks down into smaller parts; use close-ended questions (forced choice), rather than open-ended questions. • Rather than asking a child to clean their room, provide them with a list that outlines the steps in cleaning a room, e.g. making bed, putting clothes in laundry hamper, picking up toys and putting them into the toy basket.
<p>Increase Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving the child support when they are carrying out a new task can be helpful. They may require reassurance, step-by step assistance,





and gradual exposure to new or more difficult tasks.

Model and teach flexibility



- Teach children that others will make mistakes; change is inevitable; and life is sometimes unpredictable!
- Rehearse coping strategies for unexpected change.
- Modelling coping self-talk during unexpected events will help children to learn how to tolerate more unstructured and unpredictable situations over time.

Recognising and Responding to Difficulties in Emotional and Behavioural Control

Children with this kind of executive functioning delay can have difficulty in inhibiting inappropriate thoughts and actions, and regulating their emotions and actions. Children with this difficulty can have extreme behavioural inhibition – they can be emotionally under-reactive and extremely reserved. However many foster children have the other extreme difficulty in emotional and behavioural regulation – they are over-reactive and disinhibited. Most foster parents find the disinhibited and impulsive emotional style much more difficult to manage. This type of difficulty is also much more likely to cause problems in the child's behaviour and social relationships, especially in the school environment.



Children with more well developed skills in emotional and behavioural control, and well developed ability to inhibit behavioural impulses, are more able to make and keep friends. Poor emotional and behavioural regulation is also likely to be linked to a range of mental health difficulties later in life.

Children with well-developed emotional and behavioural control are more able to make and keep friends...

What Does Difficulty in Emotional and Behavioural Control Look Like?

Take a moment to think about the needs of your child compared to other children the same age. Does the list below describe your child? If so, your child might benefit from strategies to support their skills in emotional and behavioural control.

- ✓ Has difficulty in recovering from minor disappointments and setbacks.
- ✓ May over-react to other children's behaviour or what they say.
- ✓ Has trouble controlling emotions in order to make calm decisions.
- ✓ Has difficulty in self-soothing when distressed.
- ✓ Doesn't express emotions well (holds back excessively or lashes out).
- ✓ Tends to act without thinking about the consequences.

If difficulties in emotional and behavioural control seem to be a problem for your child, there are some strategies you can try. It will be important to manage your child's environment and social interactions as much as possible to avoid situations that result in emotional or behavioural dysregulation. Over time, you will be able to identify situations or settings that trigger your child and you can help your child to avoid these (e.g., limiting number of friends if large unstructured groups are a trigger); providing your child with access to calming activities and props (e.g., comfort blanket); and removing your child from situations pre-emptively if you can see they are likely to become distressed). Teaching and modelling soothing self-talk can also be helpful. Many of the strategies in the resource in this series entitled "Guide to Sensory Regulation difficulties" and the resource "Guide to Managing Emotions" will be useful for the child with poor emotional regulation.



Children can be emotionally under-reactive or over-reactive.

*Most foster parents are more concerned with
the emotionally explosive child.*

Children can be emotionally **under-reactive** or **over-reactive**. Most foster parents are more concerned with the emotionally explosive child. However, the under-reactive and inhibited style of emotional control can also be problematic. Many children with the more inhibited form of emotional control difficulty find it difficult to express emotions at all; some may not even be able to name their emotions. For these children, it can be useful to start building their emotional literacy through feelings cards and feelings charades; through modelling emotional expression; and by letting children see that feelings like anger and sadness are normal and these feelings can be expressed in safe ways.

The **emotionally explosive** child usually causes more concern. Make sure the explosive child has the words to describe their feelings and ensure you model appropriate emotional expression to your child. The more aware you are of your feelings, the more you label and talk about your feelings, the bigger the emotional vocabulary your child will develop. Your child may be comfortable with negative emotions; but have very few words for positive emotion. Use everyday opportunities to teach your child emotional cues and how to recognise feelings in others (e.g., I notice he is looking down at the floor while he's talking, I think he must be feeling sad). Create emotional safety by showing empathy for your child's emotions – help them name the emotion they are experiencing; take it seriously and give an example of when you felt the same feeling (and let them know how were able to cope with it). Be willing to understand your child's perspective. It may be hard to empathise when your child is having an explosive outburst.

Over time, if you respond empathically, understanding their difficulty and providing them with ways to calm, they will begin to learn how to self-regulate their powerful emotions. It is important to show that you can tolerate strong emotions that may not have been safe to express in the past– this is something that can be particularly difficult in the case of negative emotions such as sadness or anger. Many of the strategies in the resource in this series entitled “Foster parents’ guide to Managing Emotions” will also be useful for the child with poor emotional control. A summary of strategies is included in the table that follows.



Be willing to understand your child's perspective; providing empathy doesn't mean you agree with the emotion or the behaviour; just that you understand the emotion behind the behaviour.

STRATEGIES TO HELP WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL

STRATEGY	WHAT MIGHT THAT LOOK LIKE?
<p>Relaxation</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yoga, Tai Chi and mindfulness are all strategies that can help children to become more aware of their body, and the connection between bodily sensations and feelings; which in turn may help develop emotional awareness. There are many brief mindfulness techniques for children available on the internet. • The 'turtle technique' has been shown to help with reducing stress reactions in children. Instructions for this can be found on the internet.
<p>Tune Into Emotions</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising and validating the emotional experience of your child can help them to tolerate strong emotions. • Showing a genuine interest in the emotional state of your child will help them to recognise the importance of feelings (children's feelings may not previously have been acknowledged by the significant adults in their life).



Talk About Feelings



- Teaching feelings words is an important part of helping your child to develop a language to express their needs.
- Use emotional words when talking about achievements. This will help children to become familiar and comfortable with emotional expression.
- Try games that can involve emotions e.g., emotion charades.

Set Limits



- While increasing the emotional vocabulary of your child remember to teach the limits about appropriate emotional expression (when, where and with whom it is safe to share emotions).
- Provide and rehearse safe 'cool off' strategies for your child to use when emotions become overwhelming

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